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ABSTRACT

Descriptions of selected college reading improvement programs (most of which were begun in the 1920s or 1930s) reveals that with the exception of increased standardization in the areas of administrative concerns, little seems new. Reviewing the cases of seven college reading improvement programs (Harvard, Hamline, Amherst, University of Chicago, Syracuse University, University of Pennsylvania, and University of Iowa) demonstrate the contrasts and similarities of the programs. Early practitioners in the field explored a variety of instructional modes: classroom, small group, and individualized reading laboratory as well as individualized clinical. Programs were sponsored typically by only a few academic departments and atypically through a mandate by special college committees and/or the consensus vote of the college faculty. A number of assessment instruments were used with varying cutoff scores among programs. The qualifications of instructional staffs of early programs also varied widely from one program to another. (RS)

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Selected College Reading Improvement Programs: A Descriptive History

ED 366 907

Descriptions of selected college reading improvement programs reveal that with the exception of increased standardization in the areas of administrative concerns little seems new. The organizational structure of CRIPS was typically that of a service offered under the auspices of some academic department, most frequently psychology, education or English (Leedy), Schantz Programs usually were sponsored by only a few academic departments, but also through a mandate by special college committees and/or the consensus vote of the college faculty. However, the qualifications of instructional staffs of early CRIPS varied widely among programs. Early program descriptions reveal that instructional staff had little or no background in reading instruction. The programs at Harvard and Amherst are cases in point. Descriptions of selected early programs reveal wide variations in class size, length of class sessions, and the number of times classes met as well as the type of instructional materials used.

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Numerous assessment instruments were used with varying cutoff scores among programs, even for those institutions using the same tests. Reading test instruments used in early CRIPS varied from those which used no reading tests to those using the Cooperative English Test, the Iowa Silent Reading Test or the Bloomers Reading Test. Based upon the students' test results on these instruments, the diagnostic-

prescriptive method was used to help determine the best instruction for them.

The following seven cases of college reading improvement programs have been chosen to demonstrate the contrasts and similarities between them. They include: Harvard, Hamline, Amherst, University of Chicago, Syracuse University, University of Pennsylvania and University of Iowa. The Harvard Program was initiated in 1915 and was non-credit bearing. Although it did not have an official name (Moore, 1915), this program is continuously cited in the literature as the first of its type at the college level. However Cross (1976) reports a study skills program that predates this. That program was initiated at Wellesley College in 1894. The significant difference between these programs seems to be that the emphasis in the Harvard Program leaned more toward reading, while the Wellesley Program focused on study skills. The Harvard Program had an interesting beginning. It came about as a result of concerns and complaints from parents whose sons were not doing well in their college work at Harvard. The parents observed that "the reason their sons were failing was because they did not know how to study" (Moore). In response to this parental concern and the recognition on the part of the institution, that, indeed students did not know how to study, study skills classes were offered to all seniors. One section of 120 students using a classroom approach was taught five times per week for a total of four weeks. The instructors in this program were

professors of psychology, clinical psychology and social science. Later, the Division of Education instituted a course running through the entire freshman year. Students were tested using the College Entrance Board Examination--Reading Comprehension Section. The material for this course was generated from students' suggestions since no text was available. Later, the Harvard Reading Films were developed by Dearborn (1938) for use in this program. This course placed greater emphasis upon speeded reading.

The reading improvement effort at Hamline University in Minnesota as reported by Breyer (1923) was noteworthy because it was a non-credit, non-conventional reading improvement mentor program. The institution determined that its college seniors did not know how to read and did not attempt to read "good books." Hamline, therefore, set up a "general reading" plan which required that every candidate for graduation read ten books selected from a list, with faculty members from different disciplines serving as mentors. This list was made up of those books generally considered to be classics. Successful completion of this requirement was granted upon receiving a passing grade on an essay type comprehensive examination. This program was interesting because it was an institution-wide attempt on the part of the faculty and administration to mandate standards regarding reading and to tie those standards to graduation requirements. This program was therefore different from the Harvard Program in both its scope and approach. Its focus seemed to be to expose students to the most powerful ideas and traditions of western

civilization rather than proficiency in discreet reading skills.

Breyer (1923) also reported on a reading program at Amherst College entitled, "Social and Economic Institutions," which enrolled two-thirds of the freshman class using a classroom approach and had as its principal aim to teach students to use the library, read newspapers and magazines, make reports and carry on discussions. Typically, class size was twenty to thirty students. One hour out of three was devoted to reports by students on their reading and discussion of current events. This was one of the first credit bearing courses. Unlike other early reading classes, this course was an attempt to approach reading in a content area.

The reading improvement program at the University of Chicago was sponsored by the Department of English in 1930. All entering freshmen were required to take the Cooperative English Test as a screening instrument to determine which students should be mandated to take a specially designed, non-credit course entitled, "English 1R" for a full academic quarter. The reading instructor held a Masters Degree in Reading. This program is of particular interest because as early as 1930 it employed an individualized laboratory approach for reading instruction. Using this method the students worked on their folders, practicing materials which had been prescribed. The materials were largely mimeographed by the instructor. Classes lasted for sixteen weeks and met

three times per week (Linquist).

In 1934, the Reading Improvement Program at Syracuse University was offered for the first time under the joint sponsorship of the Departments of Education and Psychology. The title of the course was "Academic Methods" and was offered on a non-credit basis, three times per week for fourteen weeks during sixty minute sessions. The Cooperative English Test was the screening instrument used. Syracuse University has long been one of this nation's major centers for graduate training in reading. As such, a reservoir of inexpensive aspiring professionals in the field, graduate assistants, were enlisted to teach in this program under the supervision of a faculty member. Syracuse's early program is noteworthy for this administrative arrangement (Linquist).

The program at the University of Pennsylvania was initiated in 1937, sponsored by the Department of Education with no credit. Those students selected for training were administered the Iowa Silent Reading Test as well as psychological and physiological diagnostic examinations. The classes were not titled, carried no credit, and met for one hour, three times per week for twenty-five sessions. Reading instruction was offered in small groups of three to four students. Class size therefore allowed instruction to be adapted to the individuals' needs. The methods and materials used varied depending upon the diagnosis. This program differs from all the forementioned in its extensive diagnosis and highly individualized instructional approach (Linquist).

In 1946, Ammons and Hieronymus studied the reading program at the University of Iowa. The Communications Skills Committee of the university outlined a broad, compulsory, credit-bearing communications program which included reading instruction. All students were screened using the Bloomers Reading Test. Each class met for twenty weeks, four days a week for fifty minute sessions. Classes were taught by graduate assistants chosen because of their interest in reading problems. Class size was between 8-25 students each. The researchers cautioned against low level goals for students. Researchers found that gains in their classes were closely related to teachers' expectations. The Iowa program is important because it appears to be one of the earlier programs to offer credit for work done in reading improvement; though the argument could be effectively made that credit is granted in this program for language arts generally, not for reading improvement in particular. This program is worth noting, nonetheless, because it is holistic in its approach.

Through description of reading improvement programs, one can only conclude that there is not very much that is new. Early practitioners in the field explored a variety of instructional modes: classroom, small group, and individualized reading laboratory as well as individualized clinical. Programs were sponsored typically by only a few academic departments and atypically through a mandate by special college committees and/or the consensus vote of the college faculty. A number of assessment instruments were

used with varying cutoff scores among programs, even for those employing the same tests. Reading instruments used in early CRIPS vary from those which used no reading test at all to those using the Cooperative English Test, the Iowa Silent Reading Test or the Bloomers Reading Test.

The qualifications of instructional staffs of early CRIPS also varied widely from one program to another. Early descriptions identify professors with little or no background in reading instruction in these programs. Both the professors at Harvard and Amherst are cases in point. These descriptions reveal wide variations in class size, length of class sessions, and the number of times classes met as well as in the type of instructional materials used. For the most part, grades and credit were not granted in these early programs. And with only a few exceptions, these courses were offered to college freshmen.

Purpose